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WILLIAM MOORCROFT 1872-1945

William Moorcroft was a potter whose work was known throughout the world during his lifetime but about whom little has been written or published since his death in 1945. This exhibition celebrates the centenary of his birth on 27 March 1872 and consists largely of pieces from the private collection of the Moorcroft family. It is intended to demonstrate the variety of his work and the development of his characteristic style over his long career from 1898 to 1945. Although his work was exhibited regularly during his lifetime and isolated examples may be seen in museums, this is the first time that a representative selection has been shown in public with this end in mind.

William Moorcroft was born at Burslem, the mother town of the Staffordshire potteries, when the ideas of William Morris were still fresh and the art schools of Sir Henry Cole and Richard Redgrave were in their infancy. His father Thomas Moorcroft, a product of the new art training, was a gifted artist and designer. He died at the age of 36 with little to bequeath to his 12-year-old son other than his talent and enthusiasm. William Moorcroft in turn studied art at Burslem and South Kensington. In 1897 he acquired the coveted Art Masters' Certificate which entitled him to teach but, in his own words, what he really wanted was 'to express himself in clay'. In the same year the opportunity to realize his ambition came with a job as designer at the factory of James Macintyre & Co of the Washington Works Burslem.

This firm had long enjoyed a reputation for technical achievement combined with artistic leanings. In the early 'nineties among other miscellaneous activities they turned their attention to the production of 'electrical porcelain'. In 1898 the Directors nevertheless decided to set aside part of the factory for the making of art pottery. In this they followed other manufacturers of the time including Doulton and Pilkington. Where they were exceptional was in entrusting their new venture to one artist craftsman who was to be responsible from clay to kiln for the making of the ware as well as the decoration. They chose their young designer William Moorcroft for this task and called their new art pottery Florian Ware.

Moorcroft was given his own department with an office that also served as a studio, and two workshops of his own, while the firm's potting shops, kilns and other resources were placed at his disposal. He was encouraged to experiment with clays and slips, colours and glazes and also to develop his own original methods and characteristic style. He was assisted by a small group of craftsmen including a thrower, a turner and women decorators, but they were there to execute his designs and not their own. Unlike some art pottery of the period Moorcroft's Florian Ware was the product of one mind and not the combined achievement of a group, in which all too often the artist responsible for the decoration had no control over the shape or firing of his work.

From the beginning in 1898 Moorcroft established certain basic principles which provided the foundations of his later development. In his early diaries written at the beginning of the century, he dwells on the importance of ornament being used only to accentuate form. In applying this idea he was ahead of many of his contemporaries. Wherever possible his work was thrown on

the potter's wheel simply because this method alone produced the organic forms and variety of shape he wanted. For his decorated pieces, he made every drawing himself, adapting his designs for each shape and size. His drawings were outlined on the pot in slip by the ancient method of slip trailing—the early outline being heavily accentuated to add texture, the later outline becoming more delicate until it was almost imperceptible. His colours, derived from metallic oxides, were all applied under the glaze, with the exception of the gilding which was only used for a short period and later abandoned. His ware was fired at least twice at very high temperatures of 1200°C and over—originally because he shared Macintyre's kilns, which were used for electrical porcelain, a factor which helped to determine the character of his work.

In 1913 Moorcroft left James Macintyre & Co to build his own workshops at Cobridge and to found the private company of W. Moorcroft Limited, which still flourishes under the control of his sons. His assistants went with him, but although he had founded a new firm in his own name Moorcroft continued to use his individual and characteristic methods. He never employed a manager, still less a designer, continuing to make his own colours, glazes and drawings. He worked alongside his craftsmen single-handed until 1937, when he was joined by his son Walter Moorcroft; a brief interlude which ended with the Second World War. At Cobridge Moorcroft had scope for development which he had lacked latterly at the Washington Works. It was here in 1913 that he first produced the Moorcroft Blue Tableware for which his name was familiar to thousands for the fifty years during which it was produced. Though made in relatively large quantities it was, like the rest of his work, thrown on the wheel or otherwise made by hand. It was also at Cobridge in 1919 after the First World War that Moorcroft began to develop his *flambé* or transmutation glazes. He had long shared the current interest in oriental glazes but it was only when he had designed and built a special kiln, which he fired himself, that he could use them. This he did, experimenting and developing them until his death in 1945.

Although his Florian Ware was described in one of Liberty's catalogues in 1904 as 'a new English pottery in the classic style', there was little that was truly classical about Moorcroft's work. He himself claimed that he was influenced by the Far East, but, where others drew inspiration from Japan, he turned to early Chinese Art. Moorcroft's stylistic development was closely related to his technical achievement. The colours used for the Florian ware were limited to blues, greens and celadon with touches of yellow, for the simple reason that they were almost the only underglaze colours known at the time to be capable of withstanding very high temperatures in the firing. One of Moorcroft's major achievements as a potter and chemist was the expansion of this range of underglaze colours. It took him years of experiment and research to build up the range of colours characteristic of his later work, but by the 1920s he was using metallic oxides in ways in which they had never been used before for the underglaze decoration of pottery. As his range of colour grew the character of his decoration changed, the linear emphasis of the early period giving way to the use of contrast and the massing of colour. For this reason he could afford to use the same subjects for his designs, such as trees, flowers, fruit and fish, again and again, adapting each theme to suit his new colours and glazes rather than the reverse.

Although his characteristic style was apparent in all his work, Moorcroft was sensitive to contemporary taste. The Florian Ware produced when he was still under the influence of his art school training reflects the styles of Art Nouveau, while his festoons of flowers on a white ground of the next decade were obviously at home in the Edwardian drawing-room. His darker, richer colours and the bolder drawing of the early 'twenties could hold their own with the most daring decor of the post-war years or be placed effectively against the dark oak panelling and furniture of the time. Finally, although the colours of some pieces continued to grow even richer, especially where his decoration was carried out with *flambé* glazes, he reverted in the 'thirties to restrained tones with off-white matt glazes and delicate colouring in keeping with the sober taste of that period of economic depression.

Moorcroft's monochromes included lustres, coloured slipware and stoneware. It was, however, his *flambé* glazes which interested him most and satisfied a desire to combine colour and pure form. For the last twenty years of his career he concentrated on these. No two pieces were alike and he made full use of the furnace transmutations to achieve this endless variety. His *flambé* ware was highly esteemed by connoisseurs of the time and Moorcroft himself regarded it as his most important work.

Moorcroft's early work at Macintyre's gained recognition rapidly. It not only received favourable notices from art critics on both sides of the Atlantic but was distributed by famous commercial houses of the time such as Tiffany of New York and Liberty of London. His later work was sold all over the world and was better known abroad than at home. In 1904 he won his first gold medal at St Louis, U.S.A. This was followed by similar awards at international exhibitions from Brussels in 1910 until Paris in 1937. His work was exhibited regularly at soirées at the Royal Institution and, by contrast, annually at the British Industries Fair from 1915 to 1939. In 1928 he received the Royal Warrant as Potter to Her Majesty the Queen. As Her Majesty Queen Mary had collected his work for many years, this was a personal award of which he was always proud.

Unlike some other artist craftsmen of the early twentieth century Moorcroft rejected anonymity. His work became known as Moorcroft Pottery long before he left Macintyre's in 1913. From 1898 until his death in 1945 he signed practically every piece, exceptions being his blue domestic ware, some lustres and stoneware and certain purely experimental pieces. To do this he used a brush loaded with colour or, occasionally, a wooden point to write his name under the final glaze.

William Moorcroft died at the age of 73 in October 1945, the month in which his son Walter Moorcroft was released from the Armed Forces to carry on the Cobridge works. Walter Moorcroft, assisted by his brother John, still makes Moorcroft Pottery but his designs and colours are his own. He does not attempt to reproduce the earlier pieces, as this would, today, be virtually impossible.

BEATRICE MOORCROFT

LIBRARY

Case 1

Vase. 'Florian Ware' poppy design in blue, 1898. *Signed* W. Moorcroft des. *Printed Mark* Florian Ware, James Macintyre & Co. Rd.326471. (M.L.1)

Vase. 'Florian Ware' cornflower design in blue, 1898. *Signed* W.Moorcroft des. *Printed Mark* Florian Ware, James Macintyre & Co. Rd.326409. (M.L.2)

Vase. 'Florian Ware' narcissus design in blue, 1898. *Signed* W. Moorcroft des. *Printed Mark* Florian Ware, James Macintyre & Co. Rd.326468. (M.L.3)

Vase. Florian tulip design in green and celadon, about 1899. *Signed* W. Moorcroft des. (M.L.4)

Vase. Florian peacock feather design in green, blue and celadon, 1899. *Signed* W. Moorcroft des. *Printed Mark* Rd.347807. (M.L.5)

Bowl. Florian tulips in panels, in blue and celadon, about 1904. *Signed and inscribed* W. Moorcroft. Shreeve & Company, San Francisco. (M.L.6)

Teapot, sugar basin and milk jug. Florian cornflower design in blue and green on celadon, about 1905. *Each signed* W. Moorcroft. (M.L.7, 8, 9)

Vase. 'Bara', flower garland design on a cream ground, about 1906. *Signed* W. Moorcroft. *Printed Mark* Made for Liberty & Co. (M.L.10)

Vase. 'Eighteenth Century' design, with festoons of flowers on a white ground and a gilded top, about 1904. *Signed* W. Moorcroft. *Printed Mark* J. Macintyre & Co. (M.L.11)

Vase. Flowers in panels design on cream and celadon ground, about 1908. *Signed* W. Moorcroft. (M.L.12)

Case 2

Vase. 'Claremont' toadstool design in red on a yellow and green ground, 1904. *Signed* W. Moorcroft. *Printed Mark* Rd.420081. (M.L.13)

Wall Plaque. 'Claremont' toadstool design in red on a blue and green ground, about 1903. *Signed* W. Moorcroft. *Printed Mark* Made for Liberty & Co. (M.L.14)

Vase. 'Hazledene' tree design in blue and green, 1902. *Signed* W. Moorcroft. *Printed Mark* Made for Liberty & Co. Rd.397964. (M.L.15)

Vase. 'Green Flaminian' design with medallions, 1905. *Signed* W. Moorcroft. *Printed Mark* Made for Liberty & Co. Rd.452777. (M.L.16)

Vase. Prunus blossom design in ruby lustre, about 1909. Signature obscured by glaze. *Inscribed* Tiffany & Co. (M.L.17)

Vase. 'Claremont' toadstool design in ruby lustre, about 1909. No visible marking. (M.L.18)

Vase. Narcissus design on a green ground, 1912. *Signed and dated* W. Moorcroft 1912. (M.L.19)

Vase. Narcissus design on a green ground, about 1912. *Signed* W. Moorcroft. (M.L.20)

Match-box holder. Prunus blossom design on a green ground, about 1912. *Signed* W. M. (M.L.21)

Coffee pot. 'Hazledene' tree design in blue and green, 1902. *Signed* W. Moorcroft. *Printed Mark*. Rd.397964. (M.L.22)

Cream jug. 'Hazledene' tree design in blue and green, 1902. *Signed* W. Moorcroft. *Printed Mark* Made for Liberty & Co. Rd.397964. (M.L.23)

Vase. 'Brown Cornflower' design on a green ground, about 1912. *Signed* W.Moorcroft. (M.L.24)

Bowl. 'Spanish' flower design in yellow and red on a green ground, about 1911. *Signed* W.Moorcroft. *Printed Mark* Made for Liberty & Co. (M.L.25)

Case 3

Vase. 'Pansy' design on a white ground, 1911–12. *Signed* W. Moorcroft. *Printed Mark* J. Macintyre & Co. (M.L.26)

Two-handled bowl. 'Pansy' design on a white ground, 1911–12. *Signed* W. Moorcroft. *Printed Mark* J. Macintyre & Co. (M.L.27)

Bowl. Prunus blossom design in pink on a blue ground, 1913. *Signed and dated* W. Moorcroft XI–1913. (M.L.28)

Vase. Flower design in pink and green on a blue ground, about 1913. *Signed* W. Moorcroft. (M.L.29)

Tea Service (part). Moorcroft Blue, made from 1913. *Impressed Mark* Moorcroft, Made in England. (M.L.30, 31, 32, 33)

Plate. 'Pomegranate' design on a yellow ground, about 1915. *Signed* W. Moorcroft. *Impressed Mark* Moorcroft, Burslem. (M.L.34)

Biscuit box. 'Pomegranate' design on a blue and yellow ground, about 1914. *Signed* W. Moorcroft. *Impressed Mark* Moorcroft, Burslem. (M.L.35)

Bowl. 'Hazledene' tree design on a green ground, about 1916. *Signed* W. Moorcroft. *Impressed Mark* Moorcroft, Burslem, England. (M.L.36)

Miniature vase. 'Pomegranate' design, about 1914. *Signed* W. M. (M.L.37)

Miniature vase. 'Pomegranate' design, about 1914. *Signed* W.M. (M.L.38)

Miniature vase. 'Pansy' design, about 1914. *Signed* W.M. (M.L.39)

Miniature vase. Moorcroft Blue, about 1915. *Impressed Mark* Moorcroft, Burslem. (M.L.40)

Case 4

Comport. Fruit and leaves design in white reserves on a celadon ground, about 1917. *Signed* W. M. *Impressed Mark* Moorcroft, Burslem, England. (M.L.41)

Vase. Fruit and leaves design in white reserves on a celadon ground, about 1917. *Signed* W. Moorcroft. *Impressed Mark* Moorcroft, Burslem, England. (M.L.42)

Vase. Flower design in white reserves on a blue ground, about 1917. *Signed* W. M. *Impressed Mark* Moorcroft, Burslem, England. (M.L.43)

Bowl. 'Moonlit Blue' design with trees on a blue ground, about 1924. *Signed* W. Moorcroft. *Impreised Mark* Moorcroft, Made in England. (M.L.44)

Powder bowl. 'Moonlit Blue' design with trees on a blue ground, about 1924. *Signed* W. M. *Impressed Mark* Moorcroft, Made in England. (M.L.45)

Bowl. 'Eventide' or Autumn Tree design on a yellow ground, about 1924. *Signed* W. Moorcroft. *Impressed Mark* Moorcroft, Made in England. (M.L.46)

Vase. Fish and seaweed design in blue and green, about 1927. *Signed* W.Moorcroft. *Impressed Mark* Moorcroft, Made in England. (M.L.47)

Ginger jar. Leaves and berries design in blue and green, about 1930. *Signed* W. Moorcroft. *Impressed Mark* Moorcroft, Made in England. (M.L.48)

Vase. 'Pomegranate' design on a dark blue ground, about 1932. *Signed* W.Moorcroft. *Impressed Mark* W.Moorcroft, Potter to H.M. the Queen, Made in England. (M.L.49)

Case 5

Vase. Tree design on a dark grey ground, with an experimental salt-glaze, about 1919. *Impressed Mark* Moorcroft, Burslem, England. (M.L.50)

Vase. 'Honesty' design in blue and grey on a cream ground, with an experimental magnolia salt-glaze, about 1928. *Impressed Mark* Moorcroft, Made in England. (M.L.51)

Bowl. Tree design in blue on a white ground, about 1928. *Signed* W. Moorcroft. *Impressed Mark* Made in England. (M.L.52)

Vase. Tree design in deep reds and blues, with magnolia salt-glaze, about 1928. *Impressed Mark* Moorcroft, Made in England. (M.L.53)

Vase. Tree design in buff, pink and blue, with magnolia salt-glaze, about 1929. *Signed* W. Moorcroft. *Impressed Mark* Moorcroft, Made in England. (M.L.54)

Candlestick. Toadstool design in buff, pink and blue, with magnolia salt-glaze, about 1932. *Signed* W. M. *Impressed Mark* W. Moorcroft, Potter to H.M. the Queen. (M.L.55)

Vase. Waving corn design on a cream ground, 1937. *Signed and inscribed* W. Moorcroft, Made for the Paris International Exhibition 1937. *Impressed Mark* W. Moorcroft, Potter to H.M. the Queen, Made in England. (M.L.56)

Covered dish. Yacht design on a yellow ground, about 1934. *Signed* W. M. *Impressed Mark* W. Moorcroft, Potter to H.M. the Queen, Made in England. (M.L.57)

Vase. Decorated with blue and green glaze, 1935. Exhibited at the Royal Academy Exhibition of British Art in Industry in 1935. Markings obscured by the exhibition label. (M.L.58)

Case 6

Vase. Autumn leaves and berries design on a blue and red ground, with a *flambé* glaze, about 1928. *Signed* W. Moorcroft. *Impressed Mark* W. Moorcroft, Potter to H.M. the Queen, Made in England. (M.L.59)

Small bowl. Autumn leaves and berries design on a red and brown ground, with a *flambé* glaze, about 1935. *Signed* W. M. *Impressed Mark* W. Moorcroft, Potter to H.M. the Queen, Made in England. (M.L.60)

Vase. 'Waratah' design (based on an Australian flowering shrub), with *rouge flambé* glaze, 1939. *Signed and dated* W. Moorcroft 1939. *Impressed Mark* W. Moorcroft, Potter to H.M. the Queen, Made in England. (M.L.61)

Vase. *Rouge flambé* glaze with coloured transmutations, about 1934. *Impressed Mark* W. Moorcroft, Potter to H.M. the Queen, Made in England. (M.L.62)

Vase. Very dark *rouge flambé* glaze, about 1934. *Signed* W. Moorcroft. *Impressed Mark* W. Moorcroft, Potter to H.M. the Queen, Made in England. (M.L.63)

Vase. Bottle-shaped body with *flambé* glaze, about 1924. *Impressed Mark* Moorcroft, Made in England. (M.L.64)

Large ginger jar. *Rouge flambé* glaze, 1939. *Signed and dated* W. Moorcroft 1939. *Impressed Mark* W. Moorcroft, Potter to H.M. the Queen. (M.L.65)

1972